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What Does the Small College Have to Sell?

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Although conclusive evidence is not available to show that the quality of an institution is related to its size, there is enough evidence to claim that small size makes possible the achievement of certain desirable educational goals generally unattainable in large institutions. The small college (here denoting an institution of 1200 or fewer students) can offer clarity and singleness of purpose by placing limitations on its objectives, faculty, curriculum and students. The primary aim for most small colleges should be education of students for a fuller personal life and sensitive participation in a democracy. A broad general education, unavailable elsewhere, can be offered and emphasis placed on good teaching in the undergraduate disciplines. The experience of Eisenhower College indicates that the small college can attract dedicated teachers chosen on the basis of their commitment to teaching, to broad interdisciplinary units, and to the belief that specialization in the liberal arts college can be achieved by offering a few basic subjects well taught. Small colleges should adopt liberal admissions policies admitting students of a considerable range in ability. With its potential for close personal relationships and the cultivation of values, the small college should be uniquely concerned for the modern students' efforts to find meaning to their lives. The atmosphere of cold intellectualism is the basis for much student unrest. There is an urgent need for aggressive advocates of the small college. (JS)

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The Opening Address by
Dr. Earl J. McGrath,
Director of
The Higher Education Center,
Temple University,
at the 13th Annual
Summer Workshop of
The Council for the Advancement
of Small Colleges
at Santa Fe, New Mexico,
August 5, 1968

What does the small college have to sell? With this question, so directly put, Dr. Earl J. McGrath opened the 13th annual summer workshop of the Council for the Advancement of Small Colleges. Dr. McGrath spoke, as he made clear at the outset, as an advocate of the small college, and a superbly convincing one he was. His statement of the unique merits, the justifiable claims — and the very real problems — of the small, private, liberal arts college surpasses anything that I, for one, have heard recently. CASC is grateful to Dr. McGrath for his clear-sighted and heartening address; CASC is grateful, as well, to THE SHELL COMPANIES FOUNDATION for a special grant that makes possible this publication and its distribution throughout the higher education and corporate communities.

Roger J. Voskuyl
Executive Director

What Does the Small College Have to Sell?

Since I intend in this paper to assume the role of an advocate for the small college, it is necessary to state at the very outset what I mean by the term "small." Any figure chosen will have to be somewhat arbitrary because even educators hold widely different conceptions about what is a small or a large institution. Those associated with colleges of 1,000 students often consider small a sister institution of 350. On the other hand those affiliated with state universities whose enrollments number between 25,000 and 50,000 consider small the state colleges of 5,000 students. To provide a benchmark for certain value judgments I intend to make, I want to use the term "small college" to mean an institution with 1,200 or fewer students. Although such a conception of size may seem arbitrary and ill-founded at both the upper and lower limits, there is some objective justification for it.

Consider first 1,200 as a desirable minimum size. Several studies of the Institute of Higher Education have shown that usually colleges with fewer than 1,200 students have considerable difficulty in operating as efficient economic units. The inadequacy of their income from tuition fees and the excessive costs of small classes in advanced subjects make it difficult to provide an educational program of high quality. There are, of course, the exceptions of colleges of a few hundred students which, because of very substantial endowments and limited curriculum offerings, can pay competitively high salaries and offer instruction of superior quality. But these are the exceptions. If the small colleges are to have something special to sell, and I believe they

can have, they will need to attract at least 1,200 and perhaps 1,500 students, use their income judiciously in attracting able teachers, and keep their curricular offerings at a defensible minimum. I realize that many of the member institutions in CASC do not have even a thousand students; but with the prospect of ever-increasing college attendence among American youth, certainly for the next 20 years, many colleges below an economic enrollment level should be able to enlarge their academic communities and at the same time enhance their educational programs. In any event there is no reason why the personalized higher education and an intimate community life which should be a salable merit of the small college cannot be maintained with a student body of 1,200.

Now when one attempts to justify an *upper* limitation on the size of a college, reliable facts to support such a proposal are not easy to find. In fact many of the spokesmen for the large universities contend that there is no valid reason for limitations on size except the unavailability of adequate funds.

Since conclusive evidence is not available to show that the character of higher education in the broadest sense changes when the student body rises to several thousand, one can only make certain inferences about this matter from informed experience. One of the difficulties encountered in drawing such conclusions arises from the fact that the changes that occur in young people during the four years they spend in an institution of higher education are at present evaluated primarily in terms of the acquisition of knowledge. Too little attempt has thus far been made to assess such outcomes of education as growth in intellectual curiosity, basic changes in personality traits, the organization or the disorganization of the emotional life, and the system of values which consciously or unconsciously determine human behavior. In recent years some very promising attempts have been made by such investigators as Nevitt Sanford to identify and measure the extent of change in these latter characteristics. But much yet remains to be done.

In the meantime in the absence of quantified facts, colleges must proceed on the basis of informed judgments. I believe that the small college has the opportunity to provide a kind of instruction and the general conditions of life outside the classroom that make for a fuller, a richer, a more rounded undergraduate education than is customarily available in a large university with its great anonymous masses. That even the large universities recognize the potential disadvantages of excessive size is evident in their establishment of small colleges within the larger academic community as, for example, Morrill College at Michigan State University.

Therefore, I believe that the small college has the special right under proper circumstances to claim that its size makes possible the achievement of certain desirable educational goals which are usually unattainable in large institutions. In a nation whose citizens generally think that *big* and *good* are virtually synonymous terms, it may seem pernicious advice to suggest that a college unreservedly take the stand that it resolutely intends to maintain a student body of no more than 1,200 or 1,500. But such a statement accompanied by the declaration that all additional resources which become available will be used to improve the educational program would affirmatively influence many discriminating prospective donors and attract sensitive students who increasingly object to being treated as non participants in their own education and in the larger society in which they live.

Some representatives of the large institutions properly argue that smallness *in itself* guarantees nothing with respect to academic quality. But an academic community of modest proportions can, if it will, provide the conditions under which certain educational goals can be more easily achieved than in the academic megalopolis. What then can the small college do to make its size an advantage rather than a disadvantage—or in terms of our present subject, what does it particularly have to sell beyond the mere characteristic of smallness?

First on this list I would put clarity and singleness of purpose. The

small college does not have to be all things to all students. It can place limitations on its objectives, its faculty, its curriculum, and its students that are impossible in larger institutions. Thus all members of the academic community can know what the college's mission is, and how it is proposed that this mission be carried out. For most small colleges I believe the primary and dominant aim should be the education of young people for a fuller personal life and for sensitive participation in our democratic society. I raise no objection to preparing youth also for advanced specialized academic and technical learning. But never before in our national life has the demand for general and broad knowledge, combined with the capacity for independent intellectual activity, been so acute. The commanding social, political, economic, military, racial, and philosophical problems and issues now pressing for solution require of those who have had the advantages of a higher education, breadth of knowledge, informed judgment, and wide-ranging interests.

Yet perhaps the most insidious factor in the weakening of the colleges in recent years has been their tendency, often subconscious, to abandon these traditional goals by changing themselves into collections of specialized and independent departments, in spirit, if not in fact, little different from professional and graduate schools. Consequently, many of the prestige colleges, especially those in the large universities that emphasize early specialization in a single discipline, or more often, a narrow segment thereof, fail to give young people the very preparation for informed citizenship so essential to the preservation of our culture. However high the quality of the specialized training they provide—and no informed person can doubt that the nationally recognized liberal arts units in the great universities do provide such education—their failure to combine this with a broad general education is a spectacular public disservice.

The small college can provide a broad general education for its students if it is determined to do so by attracting to its campus teachers

with special interests and abilities. In fact good teaching in the undergraduate disciplines is one product the small college should be able to capitalize on. To my mind, the primary characteristic of a good undergraduate teacher is his dedication to the responsibilities and activities of teaching young people, and here I wish to think of teaching in its broadest sense. I do not pretend to be able to identify all the many fugitive factors of intellect and personality which make up inspired, dedicated, and effective teaching, for good teaching is a very complicated process involving a complex of knowledge, skills, motivation, and perhaps most important, genuine satisfaction in seeing young people of varying abilities and interests grow in mind and spirit. I feel confident, however, that the faculty member whose principal interests in life are doing research, writing papers and books, attending the meetings of learned societies, recruiting neophytes of narrow scholastic interests, acting as a consultant to government and industry, or periodically flitting hither and yon on overseas missions can only rarely be a successful undergraduate teacher. Professors who are primarily interested in advanced specialized instruction or in the few students who are destined for a life of scholarship in their own fields, and who feel that teaching other undergraduates is an insufferable and stultifying burden — professors who consider conversation with students about their problems, their hopes, and their plans for the future an improper interference with more important activities; who get no thrill out of seeing students grow in mind, in character, and in spirit—such professors cannot provide inspiring instruction for the captive hundreds of young people who under the rules of the institution must often sit in their classes.

Some administrators believe that the lure of the universities is so strong that the small colleges cannot attract and hold the dedicated, competent teacher. To be sure the competition for the highly qualified undergraduate teacher is intense, but that the situation is not hopeless is demonstrated by the experience of a new college with which I have

been associated. I use this example to show concretely that such teachers can be found. Eisenhower College in Seneca Falls, New York will in a month admit its first freshman class of nearly 300 students and a faculty carefully selected to give quality instruction in a selected group of undergraduate disciplines. These staff members were chosen from many others in their fields on the basis of their commitment to three factors which the founders considered indispensible in any genuinely liberal college.

First was the commitment to teaching. It may seem paradoxical to have to require the affirmation of such a dedication among persons employed in institutions of higher education. But if the small college is going to have good teaching to sell, it will have to be highly discerning in the selection of its faculty. With the emphasis on research and writing so dominant in the large "name" institutions, finding men and women who enjoy teaching undergraduates as their primary occupation is a time-consuming task. Yet the selection of such undergraduate teachers will probably determine whether the small college has anything really distinctive to sell. By way of contrast it may be proper to quote one faculty member at Yale who commenting on the situation in the larger universities had this to say:

> *"... The undergraduates are being short-changed and ignored. There is a feeling abroad in the land that nothing can improve education quite as much as the total elimination of the student. Universities have become places where eminent men come to discourse with other eminent men, and students just seem to get in the way of the dialogue...."*

And he could have added, in the way of research, writing and consulting.

The second commitment required of the Eisenhower faculty is to broad interdisciplinary units in the curriculum which all students will

be required to pursue. This kind of program involves substantial curricular units in international affairs, the meaning of science in modern life, the arts and music, and in values and religion. The members of this new faculty were selected in part because of their expressed willingness to develop an instructional program designed to provide this type of introduction to interrelated subjects essential to an understanding of the modern world. Most of the large universities—Harvard, Chicago, Columbia to take three—which attempted such a broadening educational program a few years ago have under the pressures of specialization abandoned them.

The whole enterprise of higher education would probably be improved in quality if the large universities gradually gave up their undergraduate teaching and concentrated on graduate and professional education and on research. If this were done the confused missions of the universities and of the colleges would be clarified, the public would know what to expect of a particular type of institution of higher education, donors and legislators would know how and on what their money is spent, and undergraduate teaching might be reestablished as an occupation of esteem in both the public and professional mind. This arrangement would, of course, cause some basic derangement in the existing structure of the universities. The thousands of Ph. D. candidates who now earn a living by practicing their untutored teaching skills on undergraduates would have to be subsidized in some other manner. And the enormous athletic enterprise would shrink in size and importance. But neither of these factors in our higher educational establishment is more important than the improvement of teaching.

Thirdly, the Eisenhower faculty believes that the small college can provide a limited but completely adequate specialization in the common liberal arts disciplines by offering a few basic subjects well taught. Many of the highly advanced courses offered by the several departments in large institutions lead the student into premature specializa-

tion with no real educational gain. Our studies at the Institute of Higher Education have shown that some colleges offer twice or three times as much instruction in some disciplines as others with about the same enrollment and equal reputation in the field of learning. Moreover their students gain access to and remain in graduate and professional schools with equal success. Hence there appears to be no objective justification for an excessively broad range of costly offerings. The small college has the right to sell to its constituency a solid core of basic subjects in the usual disciplines as the best preparation for advanced education or for the usual activities of the intelligent citizen.

In the abstract you may agree with these commitments of a small college, but you may also be asking, "How does one find faculty members committed to these goals?" Dr. Warren Hickman, the Vice-President for Academic Affairs of Eisenhower College, who has had the primary responsibility for finding these teachers would, I am sure, agree that this search isn't the easiest job for a dean or a president of a small college, but outside of raising enough money to keep the institution alive and growing, it is the most important. Without this kind of faculty dedicated to sound, personalized undergraduate instruction, the small college will have lost one of the principal things it has to sell.

I have used these features of the Eisenhower College program not as commercials for a single institution, but as tangible evidence based on real experience that there are hundreds of teachers of superior qualifications who would like to join the faculty of a small college where they can do what they expected to do when they entered the profession, namely, to stimulate young people to become interested in the things of the mind and the world of learning.

Anyone who has observed the disturbances particularly on large campuses must be aware of the fact that youth are often revolting against the practices of some of their teachers whose ambitions lie elsewhere than in becoming superior instructors of youth. With continuing effort to bring together such a group of dedicated teachers, the

small college can have an educational program which is exciting and attractive to young people. The small college really has no viable alternative, because to the extent that it tries to enter the wider market of advanced specialized instruction at the graduate and professional school level it will undertake to compete outside of its class and at best it will have only a second-rate product to sell.

Another policy which the small college could very well adopt and be proud of relates to the type of students it intends to serve. Again in the light of the pervasive status seeking in our educational enterprise it may take courage publicly to declare such a policy. I refer to liberal admissions policies. Before this audience it is unnecessary to review the widespread practice among all types of American institutions of higher education of constantly trying to raise their entrance requirements. The application of this policy in its most extreme form caused a retiring director of admissions at Harvard College to raise the question, perhaps rhetorically, whether it was in the best interests of Harvard, its students, or American society generally to select its students from the upper one percent of high school graduates. Whatever the answer may be for Harvard and a few other highly selective institutions, the general application of such a policy would in my judgment be devastating to American society as well as to the ambitions of the 99 percent who under our system of mathematics cannot stand in the upper one percent.

But it is not with this very elite upper crust that I am concerned. It is with groups who lie, let us say, between the top 10 or 15 percent and the lower 50 percent. Regrettably no historian seems to have preoccupied himself with the investigation of the scholastic-level origins of the leaders of government, industry, commerce, public affairs, or even education in earlier and recent chronicles of our national life. Common experience abundantly suggests, however, that these successful men and women did not uniformly spring from the upper levels of their high school classes. To be sure present admissions practices

may with moderate effectiveness select those who will succeed academically, but they unquestionably winnow out substantial members who if given the chance would do as well in their academic careers and perhaps better in the broader range of life activities.

I hasten to say that I am not suggesting that colleges follow the practice of one Midwestern institution of becoming a catch-all for dropouts and or the intellectually indigent. What I am saying is that our present admissions policies penalize many latently able students and potentially able public leaders. Furthermore I believe that any college which attempts forthrightly and without apology to admit a broader ability mix will have a socially valuable academic program to sell. In fact if more institutions don't adopt the policy of taking high school graduates where they are intellectually, and through superior personalized teaching advance them to their highest levels of potential achievement, I wonder whether we can really maintain a participatory democracy in our land. If the gap between the putative elite and the common run of men is to be continuously widened by selective admissions policies and preferred treatment, may we not be creating the very oppressive class systems from which our forefathers fled to find equality of opportunity on this ground?

A full discussion of the implications of present admission practices and the treatment of students would take us too far afield from our present considerations. I believe, however, that the small college which (1) admits students of a considerable range in ability, (2) which provides a faculty dedicated to giving these students highly stimulating instruction on an individualized basis, (3) which offers a curriculum designed to prepare all youth, regardless of their personal occupational choice, for enlightened citizenship, and (4) which provides a sound preparation for advanced learning by offering a limited curriculum, will have something educational to sell which the market of American citizens generally will buy.

Lastly, I believe the small college can have something special to

offer in its concern for the modern student's efforts to find meaning in his life. That this search is widespread among our young people, college counselors, health service officers, and psychiatrists abundantly testify. In fact, the general malaise among an affluent people like our own has suggested to many an informed observer that a large percentage of even so-called well educated persons are intellectually and spiritually at sixes and sevens. One of the wisest and most celebrated of today's psychiatrists and philosophers, Dr. Viktor Frankl of Vienna has explained the plight of modern man in terms of his abortive efforts to find meaning in his life.

It may be a matter of historical accident, but it is nevertheless true that many small colleges still maintain a formal relationship with a church. And they properly continue to be concerned about the moral and spiritual development of students. But even the small college which has no affiliation with a church body has an unusual opportunity, as I have said, for the nurturing of a larger range of human qualities than those involved in intellectual activities alone. Too many of our educational practices seem to be based on the assumption that a human organism is essentially a disembodied mind. The small college with its potential for close personal relationships and a concern for individual growth in all respects has an almost unique opportunity for the cultivation of values even if it does not associate itself with a particular religious denomination.

One of England's most celebrated educators, the late Sir Richard Livingstone, in evaluating modern higher education and its limitations, identifies the preoccupation with knowledge and the unconcern with values as its greatest inadequacies. The dominant aim of higher education he sets forth in the following words:

> *". . . and most important—everyone needs a philosophy of life, a sense of values by which to judge and use the gifts of material civilization. The perfectly educated man would have a stand-*

ard, a perception of values, in every province — physical, aesthetic, intellectual, moral; in his profession or occupation; in personal, national and international life. He would know the first-rate in all of them and run no risk of being deceived by the inferior. Further, as far as this possible, he would have a hierarchy of values, so that lesser did not dominate greater goods. No age needs a sense of the first-rate more than our own."

Livingstone's appraisal is justified by the queries of youth. No topics today more clearly dominate the thinking of questing young minds than the meaning of existence, the nature of the universe, and the validity and reliability of values in a seemingly chaotic world. Young people seem more severely buffeted by the violent winds of change on the sea of life and more disquieted than their elders by the lack of any ready philosophical stabilizer. Through his antisocial acts even the delinquent appears to be grasping for identity and self-validation.

Ever since its founding the American liberal arts college has been concerned with character. Indeed, the nurture of piety originally transcended the cultivation of intellectuality. Too much so, say some of those who doubt the present intellectual dedication of the college, those who hold that higher education should be concerned only with the things of the mind. Increasingly this is the exclusive goal of the universities and many of the emulative colleges as well. This atmosphere of cold intellectualism unwarmed by a concern for the relations between human beings which give life its meaning and its greatest satisfaction lies at the basis of much current student unrest. Regardless of the opposition or apathy in other academic centers toward values and morals I suggest that the small college and especially the church-related college has a special obligation to redouble its concern with character and the qualities of personality of which it is composed. In the past, the church itself has had to be the chief center of character development beyond the family, for it was the only institution that

attracted and brought young people and adults together for this purpose. Today, the college, now attended by an ever-growing proportion of American youth, has a broader opportunity than the church to help young people consider the fundamental questions of ethics, morality, and value. If it does not do this its teaching will become as irrelevant to the basic human problems of our times as that of many of its more prestigious sister institutions already is.

Contrary to some current tales of woe I do not see the small college disappearing from the enterprise of American higher education. On the contrary, if it tries to do well the limited number of things for which it is, or can be, especially equipped I see for the small college an enhanced future in our society. I see among our people a pervasive though sometimes unarticulated need for the kind of education and the other influences of academic life which the small college has to offer. I regret to say that some of the representatives of these institutions either do not recognize the peculiar merits of their product, or take an apologetic or defensive attitude toward it. We need in America as never before aggressive advocates of the small college. We need vigorous representatives who will go before foundations, corporations, legislatures, and other potential sources of support and articulate the needs of these institutions. Too many of our national educational organizations are, and perhaps by their very nature have to be, concerned with the sheer task of absorbing the great masses of students who march through their gates. But there is an urgent national need for vigorous leadership among the smaller institutions. The recent history of CASC suggests that this may very well be the organization that can render this valuable social service. It is one worthy of your most unflagging efforts.

CASC

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